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ABSTRACT

An approach to classifying the subject matter of higher education is discussed. It is suggested that higher education is primarily a behavioral phenomenon, although it contains nonbehavioral elements, and it should be studied by other disciplines in addition to the behavioral sciences. To study higher education is to study behavioral patterns such as educational management, resource acquisition and allocation, and instruction. A classification of the subject matter of higher education should begin with a definition of the observed behaviors and then define entities such as students and institutions. Most of the systematic knowledge about higher education has been achieved through the concepts and methods of the behavioral sciences. A subject matter classification should link prescriptive principles with a descriptive knowledge base drawn from the behavioral sciences and other disciplines, which would result in a linkage between theory and practice. Attention is also directed to the need for definitions of higher education and postsecondary education, the similarity of behavior within higher education and organizations, and the need to specify various levels of behaviors (i.e., ranging from the individual to the system). (SW)

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THE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE AND OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

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THE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF BEHAVICRAL SCIENCE AND OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

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Introduction

The advancement of higher education as a field of study depends to some degree on our getting straight what it is we are studying. Three years ago the Association for the Study of Higher Education decided to undertake this task and the present paper has been prepared as part of that effort. The charge to the ASHE Scholarly and Research Classification Committee is to develop a product that "might become a widely accepted classification of the subject matter of higher education."[1] A subject matter is commonly defined as a domain or set of phenomena to be studied and explained. Higher education is in this sense a subject matter; it is something to be studied. No one has argued successfully to my knowledge that the field possesses sufficient unique explanatory concepts and distinctive methodologies to define itself as a discipline.

My purpose in developing this paper is to lay the groundwork for the development of such a subject matter classification in higher education and in so doing to clarify it not resolve at least some of the issues which the Committee and others have debated for the past several years.

The Question of Method in Classification

The first problem encountered in defining a subject matter is procedural. What method shall we employ to define the domain. There is general agreement that we should begin the classification of higher education by making some initial observations of what is actually found by those who study it. Past this point, two somewhat different approaches have emerged in the ASHE project. One school of thought (Pfnister, 1983) would take these initial observations as definitions and then construct a classification system by employing the principles of logic. Pfnister (1983, p. 7) proposes, for example, the use of a logic tree which assumes that if we find one set of providers as a given level such as the institutional level categorized as having education as their primary concern, we should similarly find providers whose primary concern is not education operating at the same level of organization. Such a classification can be quite helpful because it directs us to look for things we might not otherwise observe. At the same time it imposes an order upon the field that may not reflect what is actually found.

The problem becomes even more acute because Pfnister (1983, p. 4) and others want to construct not just a classification, but a taxonomy, which assumes the existence of procedural rules and propositions by which the field can be ordered. I simply do not perceive this order at present, nor do I find a set of propositions powerful enough to find such an order in higher education if it exists or to impose one for purposes of definition. Certainly scholars should feel free to construct subject matter taxonomies, but their chances of being accepted at this point by a sizable number of colleagues seem to me quite remote.

A presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Washington, D.C., March 26, 1983.

My clear preference is to proceed inductively, observing what we find and attempting to classify it, and employing the principles of logic to render the classification more coherent and easily understood where such activity does not distort the nature of the field. Given the assumption we are beginning with observed phenomena, I can do no better than to quote March and Simon in their classic work on organizations of some years ago. "We are dealing with empirical phenomena, and the world has an uncomfortable way of not permitting itself to be fitted into clean classifications." (March & Simon, 1958, p. 1) To extend the metaphor used by Pfnister (1983, p. 2), I would first map the terrain of higher education as observed before attempting to develop more sophisticated models of what we find.

Higher Education as a Behavioral Phenomenon

My fundamental observation both of the subject matter and of the general conclusions of those that study it is that higher education is primarily a behavioral phenomenon.[2] What we observe and what we attempt to explain essentially are regularly occurring patterns of behavior. I'll qualify this statement slightly a bit later, but it comes close enough to being a basic proposition that it can stand as such. The study of higher education is thus properly the study of selected aspects of human behavior; i.e., of some subset of the broad realm of human action. To study higher education is to study behavioral patterns such as the management of educational institutions, the process of resource acquistion and allocation, the process of instruction, and patterns of coordination.

This definition lays the groundwork for resolving a second major dispute within the ASHE project and within the field between those on the one hand who want to study what is done in higher education; i.e., to study instruction, governance, and articulation; versus those who want to study the entities of higher education such as students, institutions, and society. The dilemma can be resolved effectively by defining not only what is done, but the entities that are the "doers" as regularly occurring patterns of behavior. The most basic definition of an organization is in terms of such regularly occurring patterns of behavior associated in the case of formal organizations with the attainment of selected goals. Similarly, the term student is essentially a role definition and like other entities in higher education cannot be defined without reference to the behaviors associated with the designated roles.

The need to include entities as part of the subject matter of higher education is not dismissed by this approach even though the entities are initially defined by patterns of behavior. These entities in turn engage in behaviors that both require explanation and explain other patterns of behavior. Thus, an organization increases or decreases in size and complexity and this in turn explains some of the behavior of its individual members. A classification of the subject matter of higher education should begin with a definition of the observed behaviors and then define entities such as students and institutions primarily as regularly occurring patterns of behavior to be explained and in turn to explain other observed patterns of behavior. Students and institutions are indeed "behavioral entities" and should be defined as such.

At least two major objections to the definition of higher education as a behavioral phenomenon should be taken into consideration in a development of a subject matter classification.[3] The first is that some of the most important contextual elements in the study of higher education and some of its most important products or outcomes can best be defined and analyzed in non-behavioral terms. The phenomenon of knowledge is perhaps the best example. It constitutes much of the content transmitted to students through the behavioral process of instruction and it constitutes the outcome of the behavioral process known as research and scholarship. There are behavioral approaches to these phenomena but they are not adequate, particularly when one addresses more "practice" oriented questions such as "what knowledge is most worth having?" and "how shall that knowledge most effectively be organized?"

The second set of objections, or more appropriately the second set of cautions, comes from those who object to the concept of education as behavioral change in the sense of an externally induced set of changes. These objections are found in humanistic approaches and in some of the developmental literature that define education as the bringing forth of that which is already in the individual - self realization is one contemporary concept. That's what Socrates was doing in the Dialogues argue many, bringing forth that which was already in the student.

The validity of these objections requires that openness to non-behavioral phenomena be provided for in the classification of subject matter. The basic fact remains, however, that our major interest is in the behaviors found in higher education. Our interest in non-behavioral elements such as the nature of knowledge, the legal framework of higher education, and the characteristics of the individual to be drawn forth through education, develops primarily as these elements explain or in turn are explained by the observed patterns of behavior. (Non-behavioral elements also constitute constraints that must be considered in the practice of higher education. I will address that issue shortly.)

Relation of Higher Education to the Behavioral Sciences

A second reason for emphasizing the study of higher education as an essentially behavioral phenomenon is that this approach appears the most likely way to advance our knowledge of the field. Most of our systematic knowledge about higher education has been achieved through the concepts and methods of the behavioral sciences. To achieve an even better understanding of the phenomenon requires a more sophisticated conception of the subject matter that allows us to bring to bear the conceptual insights and methodologies of the several behavioral sciences.

This intention causes an immediate problem, however, because the several behavioral sciences in turn define rather common subject matters in different ways depending on what types of behavior they are trying to explain. Consider the definition of "student" for example. To an economist, the term "student" might alternatively define human capital or a consumer of higher education. To a psychologist, a student might be the subject of a study of planned learning or a role definition in the study of the effects of social organization on individual behavior. Development of an acceptable common subject matter implies either a higher degree of sophistication than we possess at present or an inevitable looseness in these definitions to accommodate the several disciplinary perspectives.

Recognition of the multi-disciplinary nature of higher education is another reason for proceeding inductively to classify what is observed. It is highly unlikely that the several disciplines involved will in the near future converge enough to permit a single set of propositions to define their several subject matters. I prefer an inductive approach that seeks communalities in the definition of subject matter that will satisfy the several disciplinary perspectives involved.

Higher Education as a Field of Practice

The second major characteristic of higher education that should be considered in constructing a subject matter classification is that this is a field of practice as well as a field of study. Most of the behaviors found in higher education are intentional. These intentional behaviors constitute interventions or social technologies designed to bring about a state of affairs that would not otherwise exist without the intervention. The basic types of intervention in higher education are instruction, research, service, and management and related behaviors. They are intended respectively to produce changes in students, in the funded body of knowledge, in selective aspects of society, and in the system of higher education itself.

The knowledge base of practice is necessarily prescriptive or normative. Such knowledge tells one what principles to follow to reach the intended state of affairs. For example, the principles of research design tell us what steps to follow to avoid quantitative bias in experiments and surveys. Similarly, principles of instruction prescribe the best combination of techniques to achieve particular learning outcomes. Unfortunately, most of this prescriptive knowledge in higher education is not based on research. It is based on common sense, and on hunches and speculations. Descriptive research is needed to explain how these prescriptions operate and to make them more systematic and open to scrutiny about their potential consequences. To accomplish this the subject matter classification must link prescriptive principles with a more descriptive knowledge base drawn from the behavioral sciences and other disciplines, in effect establishing a linkage between theory and practice or at least a linkage between theory and the general principles of practice.

We also need to be sensitive to the fact that the linkage between theory and practice runs in both directions. A fair amount of the systematic knowledge in higher education has been developed through research focused upon particular decisions rather than organized to draw general conclusions regarding the field. These "research" efforts are often labeled as "institutional research," "policy analysis," and "evaluation." A viable subject matter must address the concerns raised by these types of research and must incorporate their findings wherever such findings contribute to the larger body of knowledge in the field.

Our concern for entities is re-introduced at this point because practice oriented research is typically conducted within a specific context and if we should have learned one thing, it is that higher education is largely the study of interaction effects. A subject matter classification must therefore clearly define the contexts within which specific research is carried out and seek to link that research to similar research and to broader studies to determine if the conclusions are indeed context bound.

Criteria for a System of Classification

To summarize the analysis to this point suggests a number of specifications for a subject matter classification and several criteria by which such a classification system should be judged.

1. The subject matter of an essentially empirical field should reflect inititally what is observed. More abstract typologies should be employed only as they can be demonstrated to actually reflect and incorporate the phenomena of the field.

2. Higher education is primarily a behavioral phenomenon, although it contains non-behavioral elements, and should be studied by other disciplines in addition to the behavioral sciences.

3. A subject matter classification should be defined to permit linkages with the most appropriate explanatory disciplines, in this case the behavioral sciences.

4. A subject matter that must accommodate the perspectives of several disciplines should proceed with caution to construct sophisticated classifications of that subject matter. The chances for error are exponential.

5. A field that is both a subject matter and a field of practice should seek to relate to the variables and social technologies used in practice. Descriptive research should seek to validate and more systematically organize and explain these technologies and should draw upon the knowledge gained through studies that focus on practice.

Outline of a Subject Matter Classification

With these considerations in mind, the domain of higher education can be defined in terms of an interrelated set of behaviors, a set of entities engaged in those behaviors, and a context within which the behaviors occur. In brief sketch the classification might be developed along the following lines: Education is itself a pattern of behavior defined as planned or intentional learning. It is a subset of a broader pattern of learning, most of which is unintentional. At the level of individual behavior we find participants who assume the role of learner and related roles defined as that of student. We find another set of roles concerned with planning and providing the learning and that group of roles we traditionally define as those of instructor or perhaps more broadly as those of provider.

Behaviors centered around planned learning essentially describe the basic domain of education. To define "higher" education we need to specify a more restricted set of participants. To define this set I would begin with an essentially European term, "post-compulsory education." This set defines those participating in educational activities who are beyond the age of compulsory school attendance. A still more limited set is defined by the term "postsecondary education" which includes those engaging in educational activities for which completion of secondary education is assumed to be a prerequisite. Finally, the term higher education defines a set of participants selected or self-selected in part upon criteria in addition to the completion

of secondary education. Obviously this definition entails problems because we find organized providers that offer higher education often offer also post-secondary and post-compulsory forms of education. Similarly, providers such as business, industry and government whose major activity is other than higher education may offer higher education as well. Nevertheless, that is the field as we find it, and to impose further definitional restrictions at this point would I think distort the actual subject matter that we propose to study.

Three additional features observed in higher education complete this sketch of what a subject matter classification might contain. The first feature observed is that among those who provide higher education at least some engage in related patterns of behavior which constitute major activities of individuals and organizations. Two of these patterns are research and service, and these along with instruction are typically defined as the major intentional behaviors or functions of higher education.

Defining these basic functions does not exhaust the domain by any means because their definition leads to a further set of questions and in turn an additional set of observations. The questions include, how are these functions planned, organized, and controlled? How are production and consumption decisions made? How are resources secured? In addressing these questions we find regularly occurring patterns of behavior defined by terms such as management, governance, and coordination, and we find additional sets of participants engaged in these activities. These participants are typically defined as managers, trustees, agency personnel, and members of the various branches of government.

The final observable feature of higher education needed to define the domain is that certain aspects of higher education are highly organized and this organization may occur at a number of levels. These levels of regularly occurring patterns of behavior in turn define entities to be observed at those levels and to be used in explaining patterns of behavior at their own and at other levels. They constitute what researchers call appropriate "units of analysis." The most readily observed entities are educational institutions, typically a somewhat complex form of organization involving a number of sub-units themselves arranged in varying levels. We also find educational institutions and other organizations themselves interacting and this level is usually defined as the inter-organizational level of analysis. (Here I would include coordination and other supra-institutional interactions.) Finally we find the behaviors engaged in by all entities to constitute a social system, and, interacting with social systems to form the larger system of society.

To define the domain of higher education, therefore, we must specify the various levels of behavior and the entities observed at those levels. In the behavioral sciences these levels might be summarized as individual, organizational, inter-organizational, and system. The entities involved are the individual, the organization and its sub-units, the system of higher education, and the other entities and systems comprising the remainder of society. The behaviors of these entities are partially explained by and in turn explain the behavior of other entities, both within and across levels.

What I have done in this sketch is to employ for the most part the major types of entities and behaviors presented by Jones (1983) and used by the ASHE Committee in its current efforts. But I have tried to show how these subject matter concepts can be unfolded from a reasonable set of behavioral observations rather than defined in the abstract. Such an approach to subject matter

classification begins with and retains the essential observed features found in higher education, facilitates linkages to the explanations provided by the appropriate behavioral sciences and other disciplines, and in turn links with and provides a basis for a more systematic approach to the practice of higher education.

All of this seems eminently sensible to me. But then being a student of behavior, including the behavior of scholarly organizations such as ASHE, I'm not taking any bets on how it will all turn out.

Footnotes

[1]Statement by the President of ASHE in 1980-81, Howard R. Bowen, in appointing a new Committee on Taxonomy.

[2]To define higher education as primarily a behavioral phenomenon and to emphasize its natural links to the behavioral sciences is not to slight the contribution of other disciplines and perspectives to our understanding of the phenomenon. Philosophers, poets and many others have been a major factor in whatever understanding and level of meaning we have achieved in higher education. But what is understood is still primarily human action.

[3]I appreciate the comments of Professor William Duffy of the University of Iowa in clarifying these concerns.

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